



until she herself was laid, a much-honored and lamented corpse, in a tomb in the south transept—she kept a private, secret holiday on the 14th of August, the day on which she who was clothed with the sun had indeed granted her, and all who saw her, that which they had sought.

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1 Qe les freres à lur pleyssyr / Ne pussent à lor sueres venyr, / E qu'il n'eit point de chalaunge. / Jà n'i avera ne lyn ne launge / Entre eux, e si le peil y a, / Jà pur ce ne remeindra (ll. 47–52). The translation in the text is by the editor, Thomas Wright (p. 139). The “Ordre de Bel-Eyse” is included in Wright’s collection, *The Political Songs of England, from the Reign of John to That of Edward II* (London: Camden Society, 1839).

MOTHER ALWAYS KNOWS BEST: A PERSONAL APPROPRIATION OF THE FICTIONAL ST. BIRGITTA’S AND MARGERY KEMPE’S IDEAS ABOUT MOTHERHOOD

St. Birgitta is seated at one of the many celestial cafes which line the city walls of the Heavenly City (according to Tony Kushner, the place closely resembles San Francisco). She sips her vanilla cappuccino and nibbles at angel food cake (delicious but devoid of calories) as she watches the Ship of Fools make its biweekly trip up the Mother of all rivers, hoping that it will not have another collision with Mark Twain’s Mississippi steamboat. She mutters to herself, “Last week was such a mess.” Yet Birgitta is not quite at ease. She hums some bars from the “Gloria” and looks toward the entrance to the coffee shop. She is a mite irritated. Her friend Margery Kempe is late—as usual. Finally there is a disturbance at the door, and Margery, looking rather disheveled, rushes in, losing one of her clogs as she moves toward center stage. She is loaded down with bulging bags which threaten to explode their contents all over the stage. She is obviously distracted but also appears somewhat ashamed by her tardiness.

Birgitta: [sharply] Margery, you’re late! Where have you been?

Margery: [contritely] Oh, I am so sorry. It has been a simply wretched day. It seems that whenever I am just about to leave the house Gerda arrives. And as usual, she was not pleased with anything—neither the breakfast I offered her—I can’t see what she has against English breakfasts.

Birgitta: [muttering] I can’t blame her.

Margery: [oblivious to Birgitta’s comment] It isn’t as if she were French, after all, and knew something about fine cooking—She’s from Danzig for Heaven’s sake.

[Margery suddenly looks embarrassed, claps her hand across her mouth for a moment, but then the flow of chatter continues unabated.] And then she started to criticize my housekeeping. She says my house is a wreck. [Margery becomes more and more agitated] **Nothing** is ever good enough for her. Would you believe, the first thing she did when she walked into the kitchen was to start scrubbing the kitchen table. Then she told me that it looked like I hadn't swept the floor in weeks.

Birgitta: [curious] Well had you?

Margery: Well no—I had more important things to do. I was meditating!

Birgitta: [patiently] Oh, Margery, will you never learn. I admit that a German daughter-in-law can be a trial. I had my hands full with Carl's succession of wives—but they, for the most part, were more sinned against than sinning. [more sharply] Of course, I had more trouble with the sons-in-law. Now that first husband of Merita was a bad lot. I am pleased to know that he got his just rewards. [Birgitta remembers that she is in Heaven and should not criticize, so she returns to the subject of German daughters-in-law.] Gerda tends to be a pain in the neck, but patience has never been your strong suit Margery—nor, obviously, is punctuality. But where is your harp?

Margery: [confused] Harp? What harp?

Birgitta: [exasperated] Yes, harp. We were going to practice the "Gloria". Remember?

Margery: [embarrassed—emotionally overwrought] Oh no, I was so aggravated by Frau Gerda that I forgot it completely. [excusing herself] But anyway, it has a broken string. I got kind of excited yesterday when I was playing some new music I learned—Leonard Bernstein's new "Heavenly Cantata for Harp and Choir" based on tunes from *Candide*. He is doing some great stuff now—and well, I broke a string. Now I have to take it to the repair shop to have it restrung.

Birgitta: [resigned] Sometimes, Margery, I think you need a keeper—and I do not simply mean a housekeeper.

Margery: What I need is a Mother. [pause—She is suddenly embarrassed by the bare truth of her statement]. What I mean to say is—I don't need an overly critical daughter-in-law. I need—well, you know what I need. You know, when I was young, I used to pretend that **you** were my mother. I was fascinated by your *Revelations*. You were the best mother I ever had. I wrote about you in my *Book*, searching for signs of you in Rome as if you were a long lost parent, since you died about the time I was born. I only got to know you here in Heaven. [effusively] It is such a pleasure to have you as a friend. [She appears ready to

jump up and hug Birgitta, but thinks better of it, calms down, and takes a sip of her cappuccino, pausing long enough to give Birgitta time to proceed.]

Birgitta: [comforting]: You know, I always thought of you as one of my daughters—but like my rebellious Cecilia, you always **were** a difficult child. [looks down at her plate and takes a ladylike bite of her cake. A small smile forms on her lips.]

Margery: [always ready to jump into topics precipitously, exclaims excitedly] Let's talk about motherhood. I always found it very difficult to be a mother. My priorities were always split; you seem to have had less trouble with divided loyalties than I did.

Birgitta: [slowly taking a sip from her coffee cup] To the contrary, I was as divided as any mother with a large number of children could be. I had the Virgin as a model, of course, but never was it possible for me to come up to her standards. Certainly, she tried to guide me in my relations with my children, framing her advice in terms I could understand and talking to me as if I were her own daughter. But I was too proud to follow her advice. I could not humble myself. I was just too eager to get the last word or to best Ulf at his own lawyer's arguments.

Margery: [breaks in] Oh, do I understand that! It was not only on the road to York that John exclaimed, "Ye are no good wif." He must have told me that three times a week or more!

Birgitta: [in a tone of voice that shows that she is not really listening to Margery] Of course, there was my own mother, who died when I was quite young. She haunted me most of my life. She came to me in dreams, warning me of my duties to her chosen faith. She told me, point blank, that if I did not follow her advice, she would be no mother of mine. I wasn't as extreme with my own children

[She shakes her head sadly] They may well think differently. Merita's marital history is sad, Cecilia's is nearly scandalous, and Carl's is impossible. Only the intervention of the Blessed Virgin kept him from perdition. I remember vividly that difficult meeting with the pope; I was so embarrassed by Carl's behavior.

Margery: [eagerly] But he's cute, and he's got a great sense of humor!

Birgitta: [sternly] That's hardly the point!

Margery: [piously she is obviously trying to cover her **faux pas**] Our children often embarrass us just when we want most for them to behave.

Birgitta: This time, though, he was indecently insulting. He walked into the Pope's chambers wearing an ermine skin around his neck, and had the audacity to have put a gold ring in the animal's mouth and a gilded bell around its neck.

Every time Carl moved, the animal moved as well jingling and glittering! Its eyes frightened half the people in the chamber.

Margery: They probably deserved it!

Birgitta: Afterwards, of course, he said that he did not mean anything by it. But it made us Swedes look like Russian barbarians. [**Margery** nods in sympathy]

Birgitta: [taking a another sip of coffee] Sometimes, I think that I was too hard on the younger ones, particularly Bengt, Birger, and Katharina. And I never got over my feelings of guilt when several of the children died young when they were out of my care. Looking back, I regret I had little time for them, but court duties, pilgrimages and religious observances, charity work, and visionary experiences had to come first. Besides, my class frowned on too close a relationship with children once they were beyond babyhood. At least I nursed my own children—even we nobles could do that, and it is healthier both for mother and baby than handing the child over to a wetnurse. Ah, but it would have been fine to have had my own mother alive while the children were growing up. Perhaps she could have instilled a sense of responsibility in some of my more stubborn children [sighs.]

Margery: [apparently feeling some discomfort, changes the direction of the conversation] Neither of us chose to write specifically about our mothers. But at least history gives you a complete ancestry, including the **name** of your mother. I lack both ancestry and progeny, it seems! In this, I have fared no better than Allyson of Bath, who has lost all her progeny to the whims of fate, all because critics interpret her unwillingness to bring her children into a marital discourse as a sign that she never was a mother. Well, all of our works have given those critics much food for speculation! If I could rewrite my **Book** in light of what I have learned by reading the critics, I would have given more specifics about my family life, particularly with regard to my children. I don't think that I did too badly by John. But aside from my one wayward son, patterned on your Carl, of course, I ignored the rest of my children. I, unfortunately, did not have a Katharina to carry on my life's work.

Birgitta: [trying to console her] Ah Margery, we cannot know how our works will be received when we write them. It made sense for you to omit your children from the record; after all, you wanted to bring others to God through your experiences as his creature, not rattle on about your family! But the fact that you **are** a mother frames your narrative, it emerges in your language and in your devotion to the baby Jesus and the Virgin. Also, your visionary experiences show how good a mother you were, even if you did not tell the whole world how many nappies you changed. . .

Margery: 3,754.

Birgitta: You counted them?

Margery: [apologetic] I've always been a bit compulsive. And it was only with my second child. You remember how out of it I was with the first one.

Birgitta: Specifics are less important than your attitude toward motherhood. Think of how tender you were with the little Italian children you met on your pilgrimage [Margery makes rocking movements with her arms] and how deeply you felt for all those who suffered in pain, remembering the pains of the Virgin when she saw her son suffering. And most of all, your experience as a mother manifests itself in your visions of Saint Anne and the Virgin and your devotion to them as their handmaid.

[Margery smiles, obviously pacified].

Birgitta: [continues] But you are right; I do have a more complete family history than you do; but this is a result of my link to the Swedish royal family and because Katharina and others wanted my life recorded for posterity. Because so many of my revelations deal with family matters, it is natural for people to see me as a mother. Even when I went to Jerusalem in my old age I was surrounded by family. You so often seemed alone and, on your pilgrimages, always managed to fall in with groups that could not understand your needs and motivations. Therefore, people react differently to us.

Margery: [interrupts] Yes, I certainly had my shortcomings. Even Mistress Julian told me to "patient be." [smiles mischievously] But you were not perfect, either, I have heard. You did have a temper, mainly towards people who refused to follow your advice. And you tend to be a little bossy.

[Margery stops when she sees Birgitta stiffen. She has learned that discretion is the better part of valor and wisdom. She changes the subject] But apropos of motherhood. How do you define being a good mother? What would you advise our audience? For I distinctly feel we have one. Perhaps they'd like to learn how we balanced child raising with our professional commitments. Why don't you begin, Birgitta, as you are my elder and my superior?

Birgitta: [sharply] Don't be silly, Margery. Elder, perhaps, superior, no. We are all equal in the eyes of God.

Margery: [interjects] Some are more equal than others.

Birgitta: [reproachfully] Margery!! [continues, sounding like a good lawyer, explaining her arguments clearly and cogently] How does one know what is a good mother? We learn by example. And the best example for Christians is the Holy Mother herself.

Margery: [interrupts] So that is why you were so devoted to the Virgin during your lifetime and continue with your devotion to this day? Is that why you know of every single Virgin Mary sighting anywhere in the world and proceed to let us know the details of every miraculous manifestation, even the most ridiculous. . . .

Birgitta: [a mite irritated] Don't interrupt, Margery! Listen and learn! [lowers her voice] The Virgin is our model for motherhood. She defends her spiritual sons and daughters with the force of a lion and guides us in both joy and sorrow. That's why I'm so devoted to her. And, Margery, by your work, I can see she has also influenced you. You also see her as the best of all mothers, but you understand that is impossible to achieve her sanctity, her patience, her forbearance, her mercy, and her wit. The best we can do is to follow in her footsteps and be an example for others.

Margery: [trying to ingratiate herself] Well, I tried to follow both your and her example. But, I just wasn't good enough. In my book, I paint myself as a respectable religious woman, but then I had to add some color to the text. And what did I become? A "crazy lady"! I couldn't even stay on my donkey on the way to Jerusalem! And I never could control my crying. But I never meant for people to see me as unbalanced.

Birgitta: [severely] We never can tell how people will interpret our works. You should have been more careful when writing yourself into your text. You notice how little I put myself into mine?

Margery: [nodding, almost on the verge of tears] Yeees?

Birgitta: [sounding like the headmistress of a good British boarding school] Now, Margery, it's no use to cry over spilt milk when you can get cream later on. I received advice from the highest of sources—Jesus and Mary—and then I wrote that in my text. You did the same, but I concentrated on **their** advice rather than **my** reactions to it, and allowed others to write my history. [waving her hand] Yes, yes, I know that if you didn't write your own history no one else would—that is a class difference. And, my dear, there is no way to erase that, even here in the ostensibly classless Heaven. You have a middle-class kind of ambition; you have to puff yourself up in front of others. Of course, this gives you an advantage: haven't you noticed that people prefer your text to mine? You, a true Renaissance self-fashioner, create your own life. And, daughter mine, once you do that, you can't help but be misread, misunderstood, and misinterpreted.

Margery: [whining] But I don't want to be misunderstood. I'm tired of people thinking that I'm out of my mind.

Birgitta: [solidly] Tough. But remember, changing fashions of criticism mean that interpretations will change—people now give you more credit for your own ideas than they did before—and fewer critics see you as a neurotic or hysterical “mess.” You have even been given credit as an aware social critic—you are right up there with the modem Gorilla girls in your defense of your art! [smiles] Brighten up, Margery, it is not so bad. As I said before, people still read your text, much more, in fact, than when you wrote it. Perhaps you should see yourself as a woman born too soon. You are just coming into your own. My *Revelations* were very popular in their day; but I also had a daughter who was a great press agent. Now, however, they’re rather out of fashion.

Margery: Still, your reputation managed to survive the Reformation—people still visit your establishment at Vadstena. I was just there recently. Here, look what I brought for you. [Margery searches in her bags and finds a pewter Vadstena medal among her many sundry belongs which she strews about the table in her eager search. The medal matches one which she is wearing. When she finds the medal, she jumps up and places it around Birgitta’s neck and bestows a big bear hug on her friend.] Here, I found it. When I saw it at Vadstena I knew that it was just perfect!

Birgitta: [pats Margery’s hand] Margery—your message is still being spread. Don’t you see—we are still acting like mothers. We wrote down texts which give people spiritual and practical advice. You show people that even though you never achieved perfection, you were still a worthy daughter of God. You even showed women how to be mothers-in-law and grandmothers. You have followed the Virgin’s example to the best of your ability. That is all anyone can do. Both of us gave our children what we could. We loved them. We tried to raise them in the Christian faith, following the best examples we had. Sometimes we succeeded; sometimes we failed; we are human, after all. But at least we tried. Can you live with that?

Margery: [thoughtfully] Obviously I have to. I suppose that is the saving grace for both of us—our humanity. So by our examples, both flawed and perfected, we mother our readers. That is the most we can do. [rising from her seat and addressing the audience] And now, yet another interpretation of Margery and Birgitta is in the works, if I’m not mistaken. I had better see what the critics are up to this time.

Birgitta: [also rising from her seat] I believe I will join you. After all, we’d better keep an eye on our progeny—spiritual and otherwise. Shall we go?

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